

# The Reserved Body and 21st Century Japan : Can Physical Education Make a Contribution?

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# **The Reserved Body and 21st Century Japan**

## **—Can Physical Education Make a Contribution?—**

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### **Introduction**

Almost all countries in the world embrace unavoidable problems that are unique to each. These are, needless to say, diverse; as a result of nationwide protests some might even halt the functions of government. We should be aware, however, of national concerns that are intentionally overlooked, postponed or dealt with only reluctantly.

In this introductory discussion, I have selected one of the latter cases in an attempt to draw the reader's attention to a serious problem; namely, one that specifically concerns Japan, the Japanese and Physical Education (P.E.) in Japan. To elaborate, I would like to present my observations and explain how I feel about today's youths in Japan, focusing especially on their bodies and day-to-day movement behavior seen as embodiment of both body-in-mind and mind-in-body. I infer that the probable cause of the body and movement patterns (behavior) derive mainly from their relationship with schools, rather than from their families or the community in which they find themselves. I will then explore the attitude towards P.E. in schools in particular, which is currently re-consolidating its *raison d'être* as a school subject. It would not be amiss, furthermore, to note that ongoing population trends in Japan have implications that reach far into the 21st century. I cite this especially because it can never be detached from our physical well-being or from our own interactions. In short, I will examine the issues regarding bodies of Japanese youths, the state of school education in Japan, the state of P.E. in schools in Japan, and the drastic aging of our society — all pressing issues that Japan will have to confront in the very near future. I hope that this will lead me to link these issues, to suggest possible solutions from my own standpoint — that of one engaged in the fields of movement, dance, and P.E. I anticipate that the solutions proposed in this paper

will turn out to be a reply to the eminent philosopher in education E. F. Zeigler, who encourages the educationists and educators to engage in P.E. and explains the enormous potential that P.E. has within itself for the 21st century.<sup>1)</sup>

Before turning to the main subject of the paper, I should like to touch upon two points: first, my use of the term “youth” in this paper does not specify a strict age range; rather, it is employed in a more comprehensive way. Secondly, the author fully understands that there are people who continue to criticize unreasonable — even negative — discourses concerning youths, but their position as socio-cultural critics lacks scientific evidence.<sup>2)</sup> I present this short article being only too aware of the point that I outline above.

### **I . Misgivings Arising Today from the Body of Japanese Youths**

“Globalization” is a concept that has become particularly significant in our lives and reinforces our perception that we are no longer able to stand alone in this world. Besides this acute awareness of our place in the world, Japan also embraces an urgent and particular problem within her own boundaries.

Politics dependent on power, an economy based on neo-liberalism, and social mores increasingly guided by achievement-oriented ideals are visible tendencies that permeate Japan today just as in other countries. It would be a travesty to say that Japan has made improvements in these directions. The economy has been in recession for years, the number of people unemployed is on the increase, and our political world remains unstable and unreliable. I would like to draw attention to what is happening today under these circumstances to school education in Japan.

School as a place to receive education used to be mandatory for most Japanese, but it has now become a somewhat trivialized entity. The road through the school education system has become just one of many choices open to each person before he steps into the society outside. This can be regarded as an undesirable consequence of a highly developed consumer-driven society, which, incidentally, allows a person to insist on his rights. Attending school today has, unfortunately, become a mere passage of time for quite a large number of students today.

It is imperative to understand why students leave school prematurely without taking due consideration of their actions, and why others simply refuse to attend school for no apparent reason. In 2008 alone, the number of school refusals of pre-university age reached over 200,000, while that of college dropouts was reported to be over 600,000. It is reported, furthermore, that there are at present approximately one million ‘nowhere kids’ or ‘stay-at-home’ youths.<sup>3)</sup>

School has somehow become for some youngsters and youths a place where one feels uncomfortable and alienated. For these young people, the significance of an education and values attached to learning has changed dramatically. This negative attitude is due — it can be persuasively argued — to hardships encountered in relationships or bullying of various kinds etc., but there is an even more convincing and disturbing reason: simple escapism — an eagerness to escape from being taught, from learning, and from associating with others. It is occasionally said that this tendency is a direct result of a developing urbanization and a pervasive anonymity in a society where people face the uncertainty of knowing one another and of building relationships. This kind of change for most Japanese is a new experience, an entry into unknown territory.

The drawings below (figs.1,2), one by Yoshitomo Nara and the other by Tetsuya Ishida, are works well-accepted among the present Japanese youths. They are drawings which ooze cynicism and exhibit a state of distress that is believed to represent their inner feelings and attitudes towards the society that surrounds them.



(fig.1) Work by Yoshitomo Nara<sup>4)</sup>



(fig.2) Work by Tetsuya Ishida<sup>5)</sup>

Present-day youths can also be regarded *en bloc* as ones who prefer anything amateurish and life-size stuff to themselves. Let me offer just one example from contemporary dance, a field in which I am closely engaged. Popular dance companies in most youth genre at present almost always offer performances that purposely exclude technique, craft, or any virtuosity that might enhance what they perform. Youths are disinclined to accept anything that alludes to professionalism, or anything that requires training or education — the very fundamentals that are practiced and developed in school.

Under these circumstances, I am becoming gradually more pessimistic about Japanese youths, not because of the gradual decline in their incentive to learn or in their scholastic ability, but because of the incontrovertible fact that they are losing their ability to relate to their peers in the context of education performed in school.

During their time at school, they are apt to encounter situations which they find totally alien and unable to



(fig.3) Wrist stitched up with zipper<sup>6)</sup>

comprehend. I cannot deny that shocking incidents, such as stabbing, hitting, slapping, punching of others that might lead to serious injury, do occur here and there, and this leaves me with serious misgivings. This must relate to the fact that the youth of today are unable to manage their own selves or inter-relate with others. Their own private body even appears in some cases to have become an obtrusive nuisance, so much so that they abuse their face and limbs with heavy piercing and other forms of self-mutilation.

It is also evident that some youths have difficulties socializing because of their hesitancy to inter-relate with others. The person who feels constrained or keeps his distance is never aware of the potential that a relationship with others can offer and never allows himself to relate with others in a normal way. In

other words, he is unable to accept others. This is what I term *the reserved body*.

## II . The Reserved Body and Expectations from Physical Education

The photograph (fig.4) shows how change should be given to customers after a purchase. It is a form of basic politeness taught to youths who work as part-time employees at places such as convenience stores. Many young workers in fact seem to be uncomfortable when having their hands close to those others. That is the reason behind the hand positioning shown in the photograph. The handing of change to a customer in close proximity demands that the



(fig.4) Extremely polite gesture<sup>7)</sup>

hands show absolute attention and care. It seems ironical to find in a back issue (2007) of a Japanese White Paper on National Life, a feature theme that goes “Be aware of the relationship with others which brings affluent life”<sup>8)</sup>

It is no wonder that P.E. is expected to contribute something towards a better understanding of this distressing situation. Yet, the teaching of P.E. as a school subject, as is true with P.E. all over the world, stands at an important crossroads. The search for a principle and solid objective for the discipline has still not been found and is still under scrutiny. Let us therefore leave the complicated discussion regarding the principle of the subject for a moment, and think more about its practical, pragmatic side, such as the methodology involved and its development.

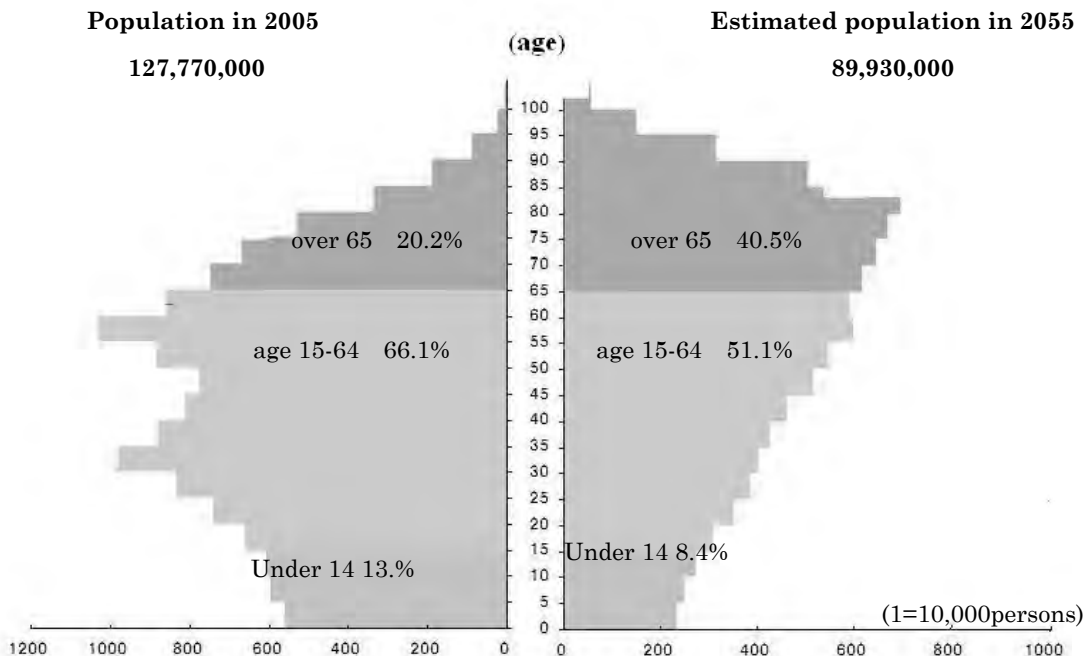
P.E. as practiced in the United States and United Kingdom, for instance, focuses primarily on the prevention of weight gain, on obesity, and on how to deal with people’s reluctance to participate in physical activity.<sup>9)</sup> This approach has been promoted and supported widely, and has been successful because P.E. itself offers realistic goals and a sense of necessity for the majority of citizens. It is therefore realistic to make a proposal which might expound the usefulness,

effectiveness and necessity of P.E. in Japan.

### Ⅲ. Urgency in the 21st Century Japan and an Alternative Raison d'être of P.E.

The chart below (fig.5) indicates the population pyramid of Japan issued by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, and compares the years 2005 and 2055.

The population of Japan started to decline after 2006, and it is estimated that in about 50 years time, roughly 40% of the population will be over the age of 65. This is indeed a society of falling birthrates and aging population. The Japanese must understand that we will face an obligation to care for others, but at the same time, we should accept from both a physical and mental standpoint the fact that a person might also be required to care for us in the near future. The Japanese will have to face this stark reality before very long. Care for the elderly will no longer be 'shadow work' carried out only by the (female) spouse or



(fig. 5) Demographic transition pyramid of Japan (2005-2055)<sup>10)</sup>

(English translation by the author)

paid care-workers, but will involve everyone. It will, in fact, become in the very

near future a socially oriented matter for a majority of Japanese.

It is not hard to imagine that the reserved body, as I have pointed out above, will have difficulty, or may not, in fact, be able to care for others or be cared for by others. This is because there has been an abysmal lack of experience in sharing (intimate) space with others and of being assimilated by others through interactive bodily movement. Furthermore, one who insists on maintaining a 'reserved body' may be completely unable to accept bodies alien to him/herself.

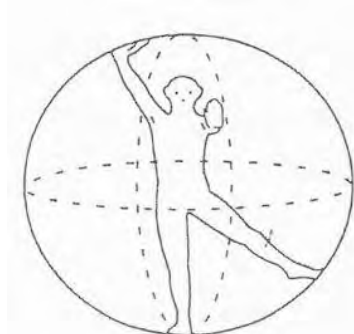
P.E. must now begin to take the initiative in preventing such a situation. School is without doubt the place that should establish an acceptable environment that is key to becoming acquainted with others, and courses in P.E. should, I believe, be at the center of this endeavour.

It is true, however, that there are kids and students who do not like P.E. or any other physical activity since movement quite often reveals who they are. Of paramount importance, therefore, is to require teachers to make students understand the reality attached to their future lives and to make them realize the disadvantages and improprieties attached to the reserved body.

#### IV. Kinesphere: the Key Concept to be Explored

I would like to make a proposal which I am convinced will encourage youngsters and youths in Japan to experience.

There is a notion called 'kinesphere' introduced and developed by Rudolf von Laban, who has been called father of modern dance and who left a number of



kinesphere

theories related to dance and the human movement. He distinguishes kinesphere (his term for 'reach space' being that immediately around the body) from space in general or infinite space. He coined the term from the Greek *Kinesis* meaning movement, and *spharia* meaning ball or sphere according to the rotatory nature of the movement of our joints.<sup>11)</sup>

The term kinesphere is sometimes called



personal space, yet we should be careful not to confuse this with the same term introduced by American social psychologist Edward T. Hall (1966), which envisages a broader concept based on territorial behavior in animals (ethology).

Space embodied through movement of the body can be thought of as reflections of the inner-self, though it cannot be easily verbalized. Therefore, exploring the space with variables, such as stimuli for the development of movement, could make the inner-self 'rich' in terms of variations and capacity.

Knowing and becoming familiar with one's own kinesphere through a series of exercises, such as shrinking, enlarging, sharing it with others, invading or being invaded by others, one may be able to obtain a free and generous body-in-mind as well as mind-in-body condition. It is then quite conceivable that human relationships supported with rapport will begin to grow through exploring such exercises. This is what the 21st century Japan and the Japanese need for the reasons mentioned above.

The photograph (fig.6) shows a fragment of the basic exercise practiced as part of a normal P.E. class.



(fig.6) An exercise for overlapping kinespheres explored in P.E. class as a warm-up<sup>12)</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Problems of the 21st century, such as disparities between regions in wealth and school education, to name just a few, are matters that require our earnest deliberation. Most urgent at present is how to deal with the disparity in personal interaction, and how to fashion a caring society in which we help each other equally, both mentally and physically. The youths of today must be made to realize that they need to prepare for this eventuality. The reserved body is observed widely among the present youth of today, and if they refuse to change

their stance, it is not hard to imagine the tragic consequences that might ensue.

The urgent task for the 21st century Japan and the Japanese, a nation whose people are now beginning to confront the ominous statistics of their falling birthrate and aging population, must be uppermost in our minds, and school education must step forward to tackle it without shirking responsibility. P.E. is in the best position to take the early initiative, and its very *raison d'être* can be wonderfully demonstrated by so doing. Furthermore, P.E. in Japan can even declare that cultivating the potential of the body — that is by drawing out generous/open phase of the body in order to overcome the reserved — can be achieved through a variety of exercises based on adoption of the notion of kinesphere<sup>13)</sup> as a *de facto* standard. This will not be a simple risk hedge or a shot in the arm designed to relieve the present state of affairs, but a permanent solution that brings optimism to our nationwide social fabric.

It is here, in the creative exploration of the kinesphere, that P.E. (along with dance) can make a significant contribution towards coaxing the reserved body back to good health. It can and should provide, I believe, the first stage in the restoration of our education and school system, and by extension, give Japanese youths renewed hope and optimism for the future.



(fig.7) A student training at a neighborhood senior living center  
(an additional example of exercise for overlapping kinesphere)<sup>14)</sup>

**Notes:**

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- 6) The photographer is unknown
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- 8) Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (2007)
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